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Opinion

Mark Ruffalo: Erie mothers battle to stop drilling

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By Mark Ruffalo

Every day, mothers take hundreds of little actions to keep their children out of harm's way, from steering them away from traffic to keeping toxic household cleaners out of reach. When you add it all up, it's a heroic body of work.

But every once in awhile, mothers will do something so extraordinary to ensure the safety of their children that it alters the way we think about our world. Four mothers in Erie, Colo., are attempting to accomplish just that, and in doing so they will help expose the truth about natural gas.

April Beach considers herself a typical suburban mom, but her story has the makings of a Hollywood movie. It started when a controversial gas drilling method — hydraulic fracturing, or fracking — arrived in her backyard.

Shortly after the gas and oil wells began operating nearby, the Beach family began experiencing a variety of health issues. April was inexplicably sick for months. One of her three boys developed asthma, and her husband's childhood asthma resurfaced. Nosebleeds, migraines and dizziness became everyday occurrences for the family.

Every day, the Beach children would walk out their door and see a smokestack venting an ominous vapor. Encana Oil & Gas, the company that owned the wells, told the family the emissions cloud was excess gas being burned off. However, April began her own investigation, and discovered that it contained a toxic mix of carcinogens, volatile organic compounds, and excess fracking fluid.

Several months later, Encana was permitted to drill eight new wells next to the town's two elementary schools, its middle school and one of its preschools. This fracking activity would not only subject children to dangerous cancer-causing toxins, it also would mean thousands more trucks passing right outside the school doors transporting chemicals, equipment and radioactive flowback water on the only road that leads to the well pad.

In response, April and three other super moms formed Erie Rising, a grassroots group dedicated to protecting children from the health impacts of natural gas development. Just nine days after the organization's founding, it mobilized more than 100 people to attend a town board meeting to demonstrate opposition to the wells.

At that time, their arguments largely fell on deaf ears.

In desperation, April sent an e-mail to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration to see if it had done any tests on air contaminants in Erie. Her inquiry revealed an unpublished air quality study never meant to see the light of day. Through considerable effort, she was able to convince the town to hear a presentation by the study's author, Stephen Brown.

The presentation revealed that Erie's air contained ozone-producing gases (like propane and butane) that were more than 10 times higher than those in Los Angeles. Benzene, a notorious carcinogen, was also found in excessive levels. A follow-up study by the Colorado School of Public Health found that residents living within a half-mile of a fracking well had a 66 percent greater risk of cancer than those living a mile away.

Two weeks later, the town board passed a moratorium on new drilling permits. The decision was a victory, but a small one. Vast tracts of land in Erie have already been permitted for fracking operations, including the land adjacent to the schools. In addition, permits are not required by the state to re-enter old wells.

Erie Rising's struggle to protect children from the imminent danger of fracking is urgent. Encana wants to begin drilling by the schools early this summer, subjecting the town's children to the dangerous carcinogens that appear to have already caused so much illness.

[Editor's note: Encana denies any connection between its gas-drilling operations and health problems in Erie.]

On June 2, Erie Rising is holding a rally in opposition to the wells by the school. Erie Rising's members still have a long fight to protect their kids, but they are exposing the claim of clean natural gas as a dirty lie. It's a struggle that is paving the way for mothers across the nation to stand up and fight for their own children's future.

Actor Mark Ruffalo is co-founder of Water Defense (waterdefense.org).